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SUICIDE CONTAGION: IS THE MEDIA PLACING THE PUBLIC AT RISK?

AN ANALYSIS OF SUICIDE REPORTING IN NEW ZEALAND NEWSPAPERS

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ABSTRACT

The media's reporting of suicide has been shown to increase subsequent community suicide rates through a process called suicide contagion. It is not necessarily the reporting of suicide that causes suicide contagion, but rather it is the manner in which it is reported. As a result, within New Zealand a number of legislative (the Coroners Act, 2006) and industry guidelines (Reporting Suicide: A resource for the media, 2011) have been introduced to decrease any risk of suicide contagion. The aim of the present study was to investigate how suicide is portrayed in newspapers, examine whether suicide reporting has changed between two timeframes, and explore journalists' beliefs and behaviour about suicide reporting. The present thesis is divided into two parts. Study One uses quantitative and qualitative methods to compare and contrast all suicide newspaper articles from leading New Zealand newspapers from 12 month periods in 1997 (pre-suicide guidelines) and 2009 (post-suicide guidelines). The results revealed that reporting quality had improved where there was a decrease in the occurrence of elements known to contribute to suicide contagion. However, despite reporting quality improving the study identified that articles continued to include a number of areas where suicide reporting could be improved upon. Study Two complemented Study One by interviewing journalists about their knowledge of contagion, reporting practices and barriers and difficulties in suicide reporting. The rhetorical analysis demonstrated that participants argued that evidence for suicide contagion was inconclusive and problematic. This had important implications as the media argued their reporting was to a high standard and consequently did not view reporting guidelines or the Coroners Act as necessary. As a result, participants largely avoided these restrictions and viewed them as a threat to media freedom. Together these studies demonstrated that suicide reporting quality can still be improved, however, in order to improve writing styles, implementing suicide guidelines does not appear enough. Instead, this study demonstrates that it is necessary to increase media awareness of suicide contagion, so the media understand the importance of applying reporting guidelines.

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PREFACE

The reporting of suicide within New Zealand has become a very topical subject as many people have begun to question the appropriateness of the Coroners Act which specifically limits what suicide information the media can or cannot report (Armstrong, 2012; Carvill, 2012; Clements, 2011; Fleming, 2012; O'Neill, 2012). This thesis expands on this interest to explore suicide reporting practices in New Zealand newspapers. The thesis begins with a general introduction which guides the reader through relevant literature, providing necessary background information and orients readers towards the two studies completed. Study One explored how suicide was portrayed in newspapers, and Study Two, explored editors and journalists attitudes, opinions, processes and constraints of suicide reporting. Although the two studies are both about suicide reporting, each was distinct and involved different data collection methods, types of data and forms of analysis. Therefore, following the general introduction, Study One's method and result sections is followed by Study Two's method and results. Finally, a general discussion chapter is used to conclude and bring the two studies together.

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